

EDITORIAL

After Deren

by Claudia Kappenberg and Douglas Rosenberg

There have been numerous books and articles written on Maya Deren, and of course Deren herself left us with an abundance of writing that serves as a metric for scholarship based on her film practice. Deren has been the object of much scrutiny and occupies a rarified position in the narrative of experimental film, though less has been written explicitly addressing her contributions to screendance. This issue is devoted to Maya Deren, which means that for the first time, Deren is viewed within the context of screendance as a genre, a methodology, and a practice. Indeed, this issue explores Deren in the context of Deren.

Maya Deren's orbit encompasses multiple spheres of influence and Deren herself often seems to appear in different guises or manifestations. There is the actual, historical Maya Deren, but also the utopian, perfected image of Maya Deren and the mythological Deren encouraged by both temporal distance and the re-imagining of her via digital culture itself. One sphere of influence derives from thinking about Deren as *contemporary*—the projection of Deren filtered through the lenses of feminist theory, film theory, Freudian analysis, and a host of other literary and cinematic tropes and devices, each of which contribute something to the multi-faceted crystalline figure we call Deren. The other is the lingering shadow of Deren as both a maker of films rich with visual references, and also as a passionate writer of lectures, essays, and diaries that offer clues about her process and the origins of her particular species of filmmaking.

Maya Deren (née Eleanora Derenkowskaia) is an uncontested pioneer of the American Avant-Garde, if not its "mother"; but how American was this avant-garde, and should we insert an "s" to signal multiple avant-gardes? Bill Nichols's introduction to *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (2001) begins with a biographical account of Deren's origins in Kiev (where she was born in 1917), and describes her emigration with her parents to the US in 1922 as they fled anti-Semitic pogroms. Deren became a naturalized citizen in 1928 and later immersed herself in a European émigré scene in Greenwich Village. Eventually she was joined by Czech photographer and filmmaker Alexander Hammid (Alexandr Hackenschmied) who came to the United States in 1942, twenty years after Deren. Just one year later they would make their first collaboration, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

Another figure in the New York émigré scene was Lithuanian poet, filmmaker, and art activist, Jonas Mekas. Mekas arrived in New York in 1950 from Germany, where he had lived for six years following his escape from his native Lithuania in 1944. In an interview for his 2012 exhibition in Cologne and London, he recalls that he could read English when he arrived in New York—he had read Hemingway—but that he kept all his notes in Lithuanian until the mid-fifties, eventually writing his diaries in English by 1957. Publishing regularly

on the new American experimental film, he quickly became a spokesperson, although his early writings vehemently criticized the American “film-poems” for being feeble, unintelligible, and lacking in meaning and moral stance.¹ In this early writing he particularly accuses Deren of intellectual formalism, revealing not only a patriarchal attitude but advocating a very different, improvisational approach to filmmaking.²

Radically changing his position, he began to advocate the new film and formulated, in 1960, the first manifesto of the New American Cinema Group, a public statement serving in part to identify the new group of filmmakers as American.³ However, this was no homogenous group and Maya Deren was conspicuously absent from his reviews—such as the extensive “Notes to the New American Cinema” from 1962.⁴ Discussing categories such as spontaneous street films, social engagement films, cinematic improvisation and the new documentary frontier, he praised above all “The Pure Poets of Cinema”: Brakhage, Breer, and Marie Menken, the latter also a Lithuanian.⁵ Another significant figure of the experimental film scene, who, like Deren, didn’t make it into the “Notes” from 1962, was Kenneth Anger, an American who was strongly influenced by the European avant-garde and in particular by the French filmmaker, artist, and poet, Jean Cocteau. Anger shot his seminal film *Rabbit Moon* in Paris in 1950 thanks to the support of the Cinémathèque Française, which furnished him with 35mm film stock.⁶ Anger identified strongly with the European tradition; in an interview for the Guardian newspaper in 2010, he was asked if he knew what he was doing back in 1947 in Hollywood when he made the film *Fireworks*. He replied: “Well, I knew all about French Avant-garde, so I was the American Avant-garde.”⁷ By contrast, Deren, whose work is so often associated with and read through a European lens of Surrealism and Freudian analysis, vehemently rejected these as points of reference for her films. Eventually, in 1963, Mekas published *Imagism in four Avant-Garde Films*, discussing both Deren’s *Choreography for Camera* as well as Anger’s *Eaux d’Artifice*.⁸ For the essay Mekas took inspiration from a reference that filmmaker Stan Brakhage had made to the Imagists’s concept of the image as central motivation for poetry, which Mekas thought to apply to avant-garde film in general. Deren had of course written her MA thesis on the Imagists back in 1939 and their ideas had been key to the theorization of avant-garde film which she developed in the 40s and 50s.⁹ Mekas’ essay of 1963 could therefore be considered as an example of the slow, deferred and oblique uptake of Deren’s critical oeuvre.

Given the ambivalence of the American filmmakers with regards to the earlier European films, the naming of the New American Cinema Group can be seen both as a reference to and a distinction from the European avant-garde. The latter was known, above all, as the French avant-garde, a name that was just as generalizing as it in turn had been led by a peripatetic group of artists such as the Romanian Tristan Tzara and the American immigrant Man Ray, the émigré Marcel Duchamp and the German Walter Benjamin.

The New American Cinema Group may well have been called the émigré Cinema Group, but its identification as an American film movement made strategic sense in allowing artists to signal differences and new beginnings. In reality, the group represented the continuity of a wide-ranging network full of intersecting lines that connected an international field of artists and practices that collectively demonstrated a desire to forge an identity as an autonomous cultural force. Still, at the same time, these filmmakers aspired to share European provenance with their counterparts. This is not dissimilar to, and perhaps

reinforced by, the complexity of cinema as an art form, which was from the very outset a cross-disciplinary project, advanced by diverse disciplines and artists spread across different international locations.

This scenario of an internationally connected, multinational group of filmmakers who were exploring a medium that was not yet established as a medium for art constitutes the backdrop for this issue on Maya Deren and her legacy. A range of international voices have therefore been brought together to demonstrate the wide impact of Deren's work and the extensive migration of her ideas. The writers featured in this issue articulate questions from within a muddy yet vital zone of inter-, trans- and cross-disciplinary debates, offering readings of Deren's work while further opening up the field of possible references. Much like Nichols's *Maya Deren and the American Avant-garde*, which grew out of a conference at San Francisco State University in 1996, this issue of *The International Journal of Screendance* builds on a Deren season at the British Film Institute in London in 2011. Curated by Elinor Cleghorn as part of her PhD research into the relation between the body and technologies in early film practices, the conference demonstrated a significant interest in Deren's work from UK-based filmmakers and scholars. This was complemented by Claudia Kappenberg's visit to Buenos Aires and discussions on Maya Deren's influence in South America at the Festival Internacional de Videodanza, which suggested that an issue of the *International Journal of Screendance* devoted to Deren would be very relevant for the international readership. Finally, a retrospective in 2012 of the American filmmaker Barbara Hammer at Tate Modern (London, UK) and at the Jeu de Pomme (Paris, France) with a screening of *Maya Deren's Sink* suggested a further expansion of contemporary perspectives on Deren.

Besides inviting scholars from the global community to contribute to the issue, we also chose to profile three filmmakers—Jayne Parker from the UK, Narcisa Hirsch from Argentina, and Barbara Hammer from the US—in order to explore Deren's legacy in contemporary film practices. This focus on contemporary filmmakers was a deliberate choice in that film studies and histories are somewhat underrepresented in current discourses on screen-dance. On the other hand, and despite this focus on Deren's films as films, the essays in this issue speak across art forms and seek to articulate the hybrid nature of Deren's practice and its many different roots. As the debates at the British Film Institute provided the starting point for this issue, we invited the curator of the Deren season, Elinor Cleghorn, to be guest editor and to work with us on bringing together scholarly research and artists' points of view, historical perspectives, and contemporary voices.

In this issue there are recurring references to such thinkers and theorists as Laura Mulvey, Walter Benjamin, Georges Méliès, Judith Butler, and Renata Jackson, as well as to conceptual frameworks surrounding proto-feminism, the body, Surrealism, and temporal phenomenology, among many others. As Harmony Bench points out in the following prologue, the diversity of Deren's legacy is evident throughout the issue; indeed, in "Thresholds to the Imaginary," Lucy Reynolds notes that, "Despite some compelling arguments, it may therefore be more productive to see Deren's practice in relation to the wider discussions of pre-war thinkers contemporary to the Surrealists, who were also engaged in debating the potential, and social impact, of the new medium." Reynolds goes on to position Deren as a product of a fertile surrealist/fin de siècle culture whose work flirts with the uncanny. Sarah Keller interviews legendary filmmaker Barbara Hammer, who cites the synergy of practice and theory in Maya Deren's approach to her life/work as instrumental

in her own artistic development. Hammer also notes the specificity of Deren's medium and the spaces in which it was situated:

If Maya Deren lived in the woods as a wild child with a video camera, with multiple hours of recording devices, I think we'd have a different kind of film. And I think that *Meshes* and *Ritual* are really home-based works. *Meshes* was all shot in her home. A lot of *Ritual in Transfigured Time* was shot in her Morton Street home and some of *Study for Choreography for Camera* was too. The interior structure of the home means the artifacts in the home are visible as images on the screen for us to see, even if we can't handle them. If an artist is working in space-time relationships, the space that she lived in and worked in seems to me a very interesting primary focus of what occurs in the filming itself.

As Hammer reminisces about her own films, it becomes clear that she has often appropriated Deren's fantasies, reanimating the kinetic, dancery exuberance of Deren in the process.

Sophie Mayer finds traces of Deren in Jane Campion's films and identifies Deren's relationship to the "narrative, pleasurable and political." Separating from the Surrealist tether that most often is used to situate Deren's cinematic visuality, Mayer notes that Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* "is an uncanny prefiguration of many of the preoccupations of film *noir*; indeed, it fuses suggestively three popular American genres of the 1940s: *noir*, the musical, and melodrama." She locates Deren's anxious *Jewishness*, pointing out that, "The film's labile atmosphere and intensely private domestic language, at once intimate and violent, can be read as suffused with specific anxieties about being a leftist Jewish immigrant in the US in 1942," an important observation and analytical point of view. Finally, Mayer tracks the logical extension of Deren's film architecture to Jane Campion's *In the Cut*. And Andrew James notes the influence of Annette Michelson's *On Reading Deren's Notebooks* in mining Deren's own writing and film work for traces of interdisciplinarity. James treads into potentially fraught territory by drawing out Alexander Hammid's contributions to Deren's work, thus raising issues of authorship, genius, and embedded narratives and mythologies that are oft-quoted tropes of modernism.

With *After Deren*, the journal launches headlong into current, lively debates on a filmmaker who, for some, is the representative of screendance as such. However, Deren's systematic grounding of her practice in theory and her ongoing concerns with the ethical dimension of technologies and artistic practices is not as widely known. The aims of this issue are therefore to honor Maya Deren as artist *and* theorist; to examine current research on Deren; and to do so in the context of contemporary screen-based practices that bear traces of Deren's work.

In *The Essential Deren* (2005), Bruce McPherson gives a brief and humorous account of Deren that offers insight into her free spirit and passionately inquisitive nature. Arguing with a Central Park officer over a permit for filming in the park, Deren gets into trouble when she cannot describe the film, identify its content or its purpose, or indicate why in fact she is making it. Afterwards, reflecting on the situation, Deren writes:

... after three years and five films I had no succinct term or formula to describe their nature. My work has constituted an exploration of the medium of film rather than the fulfillment of a precise goal. I am fascinated precisely by those aspects and methods of cinema which are as yet undefined and rarely exploited.¹⁰

Even though Deren was a prolific writer and speaker, continuously advancing the theorization of her practice, any writing on Deren must be mindful of her persistent quest to develop and refine her ideas and her artform.

A journal is a form of curation that sits between the determined form of books and other more temporary structures; it functions both as a response to a field and as a provocation or call. The dedication of a whole issue to one single artist/theorist is a curatorial invitation, or provocation, to the dominant mode of screendance festivals and screenings, which seldom commit the whole of their resources to a single artist and the in-depth focus that such a commitment entails. All of the authors in this issue approach Deren not as an untouchable icon, but rather as a filmmaker who left behind a treasure trove of researchable and *readable* material, both on film and on paper. We hope that readers will find this focus and detailed scholarship inspiring and rewarding.

Notes

1. Mekas, "The Experimental Film in America."
2. *Ibid.* 23, 24.
3. "Shoot Shoot Shoot," in *Jonas Mekas*, 181.
4. Mekas, "Notes to the New American Cinema."
5. *Ibid.* 98–101. For a discussion of his friendship with Marie Menken see "Jonas Mekas on His Films: Interview with Scott MacDonald," 148.
6. "Rabbit's Moon + Kenneth Anger in Conversation," n.p.
7. Hattenstone, n.p.
8. Mekas, "Imagism in four Avant-Garde Films."
9. Deren, "The Influence of the French Symbolist School on the Anglo-American Poetry."
10. McPherson, *Essential Deren*, 199.

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